
Exterior Spaces



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"The job of a teacher is to excite in the young a boundless sense of curiosity about life, so that the growing child shall come to apprehend it with an excitement tempered by awe and wonder."

- John Garrett



Exterior Spaces

When designing a child care facility, it's easy to focus all the attention on interior spaces and leave the outdoor spaces as an after-thought. However, the external appearance of your building and exterior spaces reflects the quality of your program. Outdoor spaces play an important role in marketing who you are, what you value and what you have to offer.

Outdoor spaces will vary in design depending on the ages of children in the program as well as the number of children that are served. As with the indoor spaces, licensing and building code requirements must be met. These requirements are primarily focused on safety and risk management and should be used as minimum standards that are augmented with thoughtful design ideas to provide an engaging and nurturing environment.

Consider consulting with a landscape designer to enhance the design of your facility. Give as much attention to providing plant materials as you do to sports and outdoor play equipment. Ensure that there are no toxic plant materials accessible to children on your site.

Remember to consider an outdoor source of water, storage and issues of ongoing cleaning and maintenance.

APPROACH TO THE CENTER

The exterior spaces at the entry are as important as the interior entry spaces. As children and their families approach the center and pass through the doors, they receive strong messages about the quality of the program and how much the people there care about children. The area around the entry should be clean and well-kept, with landscaped beds or pots of plants and flowers. A safe and obvious entry that allows those approaching to see inside and has an easy-to-read sign is essential.

As children and their families approach and leave the center, they should be able to do so safely, without negotiating heavy traffic or other hazards, like uneven or slick surfaces. Accessible sidewalks should be provided from the street, from parking spaces and from loading zones, to the entry of the facility. It is important that vehicular traffic is well separated from children's play areas.

Check with your local land use department for parking requirements which may include a certain number of dedicated load / unload spaces and staff parking spaces. The quantity will likely depend on the capacity of your center, either the number of children enrolled or the number of staff on site at one time. Land use codes may also dictate the allowable locations of the parking and loading areas

and you may need to provide sufficient space for vans or school buses to safely load and unload school age children.

CHILDREN'S OUTDOOR ACTIVITY AREAS

Outdoor space isn't just a place for "recess" or blowing off steam. It is central to the education and development of the children in your program. Children need more than a fence, blacktop and climbing structure on the playground. Different age groups will require areas geared specifically toward their age appropriate development and safety. Many of the components for a nurturing interior environment also apply to your exterior spaces:

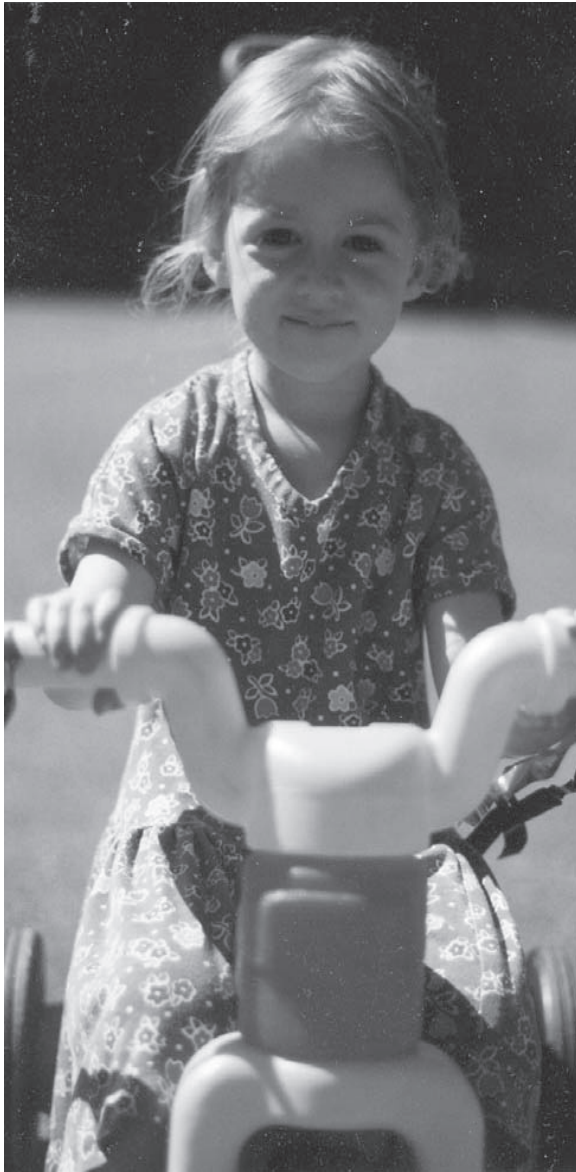
- Plenty of room so that crowding and competition for space are avoided
- Numerous places for children to be alone, or with a small group of playmates
- Equipment in good repair, arranged with a sense of design and order
- Comfortable places for adults to sit with children and with each other
- Elements of the natural world—trees, grasses, flowers and herbs; water, sand, wood, sun, and shade
- A source of water for playing and watering plants

- Moveable materials that offer opportunities for young bodies and minds to discover, explore, invent and engage with their environment
- A range of equipment for children to test and develop their physical abilities
- Opportunities for safe risk taking

Outdoor activity areas, designed to promote physical development, coordination and an appreciation of the natural world, are required by licensing. DSHS / DCCEL requires a minimum amount of square footage for each child on the playground at any given time. Make sure there's enough room to provide for many different play areas with a variety of experiential qualities. Think of outdoor play areas like indoor activity areas, with many discrete areas clearly separated and defined from each other, offering a range of options to engage a child and promote physical development. Provide natural features like trees, rocks and natural slopes. Provide private spaces, and spaces for group play. Some equipment ideas for children's outdoor play activities include a sand box, planting beds, slides, swings, rolling toys, teeter totters and water tables.

You should also think about providing shaded areas protected from the sun and covered areas that allow for some outdoor activities when raining. Some





opportunities for both shade and rain protection include wide roof overhangs, detached pavilions, play sheds and porches.

At child care centers for young children, consider some kind of device, like a hedge, play panel or low fence, to keep the pre-school children and older toddlers separated from the infants and younger toddlers. While the children enjoy seeing each other, such a device will prevent the older children from overwhelming the younger children and inadvertently causing harm.

Areas with hard surfacing, like concrete or asphalt, are needed for rolling toys, tricycle tracks and bouncing ball games. Softer surfaces like grass, moss and dirt should also be provided for a variety of tactile experiences and play opportunities. The outdoor play areas should either drain water well already or be modified with a below grade storm water drainage system to ensure that the area is dry and ready for use, even after it rains.

Climbing is an essential outdoor activity through which children test and develop their physical abilities. Provide age appropriate climbing structures and other equipment that challenges an age group without presenting too much risk.

You must provide an acceptable resilient surfacing material below and around climbing structures to help protect children from injury when they fall. Some acceptable materials include rubber mats, engineered wood fiber (a special kind of wood chips), gravel, and shredded tires. There are advantages and disadvantages of each of these surfacing materials. Generally, the higher the cost of the material, the less maintenance required and the less mess involved.

There are extensive and detailed regulatory requirements that apply to climbing structures. When installing the resilient surfacing at climbing structures, you must be sure to provide the required minimum fall zones around each piece of equipment. See ASTM Publication F-1487 *Standard Consumer Safety Performance Specification for Playground Equipment* and the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission's *Handbook for Public Playground Safety* for guidelines and requirements of climbing structures and fall zones.

Many companies provide pre-manufactured climbing structures, or pre-manufactured components. Climbing equipment manufacturers can be very helpful in understanding and meeting these requirements.

Access

Ideally the outdoor play areas will be located directly adjacent to the classrooms, but a short walk to a fenced play area may be allowed, particularly for older children. If absolutely necessary, a nearby park or playground may be approved for use for outdoor activities. Obtain approval from DSHS / DCCEL prior to your commitment to any particular site / facility if you plan to use an outdoor activity area that is not directly adjacent to the classrooms. DSHS / DCCEL staff will want to confirm that the path to the park is safe and that you will commit sufficient supervision when children are passing through un-fenced areas. DSHS / DCCEL licensors and health specialists will also want to ensure that the park has safe, age appropriate equipment and that it is fenced or suitably enclosed.

Easy access to children's toileting facilities from the outdoor play areas can help to ensure that required staffing and oversight are maintained. A small, high, operable window in either the exterior wall or exterior door can provide visibility and audio connection for teachers while still maintaining privacy for children.

Also, be aware that outdoor play areas must comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). You

will need to provide barrier-free access to a number of regular activities over firm, smooth, non-slip ground surfaces and some of the equipment will need to provide barrier-free, appropriate play opportunities. A playground equipment specialist, such as a play equipment manufacturer, can provide detailed advice.

Enclosure

The outdoor play area must be either securely fenced, or safely enclosed by some other means approved in writing by the DSHS / DCCEL licensor and the health specialist. Fence height requirements vary depending upon site conditions. Fences need to be taller when perceived hazards are nearby, for example, heavy or fast-moving traffic or bodies of water. Fences should be as difficult as possible to climb.

When designing the outdoor play areas, you may need to plan for new fences, covered play areas, retaining walls or other constructs that will create appropriate ground levels, slopes, protection and enclosures for the outdoor activities provided. Check the local zoning codes or with a land use official to make sure that your construction plans comply with local zoning regulations, such as setbacks, height limits, and maximum lot coverage allowed. Check





with your local building department to see if covered play roofs, retaining walls and other similar structures will require structural engineering.

Exit Requirements

The building code almost always requires two exits from each child care center classroom. These exits are allowed to pass through the fenced outdoor play area. Such evacuation pathways must meet clearances and other criteria described in the building code for exiting all the way to a public street or alley. Plan accordingly for the movement of children and evacuation cribs (cribs on wheels are required for the safe evacuation of infants) through all outdoor areas. Ramps may be required. Additionally, two exits will be required from the fenced outdoor play areas. These exits are generally not allowed to go back through the building, but rather must take occupants to a public street or alley. All required exit doors and gates must be unlocked during hours of operation. Verify the policies regarding locked exits during closed hours with your building code official and with a State Fire Marshal.

You will also need to pay attention to the types of latches used on gates located on exit paths. Latches must meet the conditions of the ADA and building code requirements for ease of operation in

the case of an emergency. While it seems desirable to install latches high enough so that children cannot reach them, the mounting height must be within the specified ADA reach ranges. An ADA acceptable latching device does not involve pinching, twisting or grasping to operate. Consult with your fence installer and the local building code inspector to ensure compliance with applicable codes.

Storage

It is strongly advised that you provide some kind of storage for outdoor toys, including wagons, tricycles, balls, sand toys, etc. Approximately 200 square feet of storage is recommended for centers serving young children, and more for centers serving school-age children. Sheds, or closets attached to the building with shelving inside are ideal, but chests can also work and can double as benches. Storage for clean up and maintenance tools is helpful as well.

GARBAGE/RECYCLING/DIAPER SERVICE COLLECTION

Child care centers support a lot of activity and creative exuberance which, unfortunately, also creates a lot of refuse. You will need to predict the volume of each type of refuse (e.g. garbage,

recyclables, yard waste, diaper service) you will generate, the schedules for collection, and the size and location of the area needed to store the various refuse containers.

Consult with child care operators of other programs similar to yours to get a useful basis of comparison. Call your local solid waste department to determine available collection services. These companies can advise you on size and type of containers for storing refuse on site and the frequency of collection. Many jurisdictions now provide recycling services for glass, paper and many plastics, for which you will need separate collection containers. Should you use a diaper cleaning service, you'll also need separate containers for dirty diapers awaiting collection.

Your refuse containers should be located both convenient to the center and acceptable to the collection services you will be using. The collection vehicles need certain minimum clearances to access the containers and frequently have maximum distances they will travel onto your site.

To protect the children and others from potentially infectious material and to screen the garbage from view, some type of enclosure around the containers should be provided. Some zoning codes now require dumpster and garbage facilities to be screened or otherwise enclosed.

